

## Aberystwyth University

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# **Undergraduate library and information science education at Aberystwyth**

**David Stoker**

## **Introduction**

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the undergraduate programme of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth (formerly the University College of Wales). This was first undergraduate ‘honours’ (as opposed to a ‘general’ degree course in librarianship to be offered by a UK institution. It was a wide ranging joint honours programme where the LIS half of the course was taught by the neighbouring College of Librarianship Wales, and combined with a traditional ‘academic’ subject taught by one of the university departments within the faculties of Art, Science, Social Sciences, Education and Law. The content and structure of this programme continued with relatively little change for more than two decades, until the merger of these institutions in 1989, created a new Department of Information and Library Studies which was fully integrated within the university. This presaged a period of rapid and far-reaching changes to undergraduate LIS education at Aberystwyth, the effects of which are only just becoming apparent. The undergraduate programme now consists of a range of single and joint honours degree schemes in information and library studies, information management and information science which are studied full-time, as well as a unique and highly successful distance learning programme. This article will therefore seek to describe the content and development of the various undergraduate LIS courses at UWA over the last three decades, the different categories of student they are seeking to serve, and the major pedagogical issues currently facing those who deliver them.

However the changes that have taken place to LIS education at Aberystwyth, must be seen in the context of the equally rapid and far-reaching changes that have taken place to the overall pattern of Higher Education in the United Kingdom over the same period, which have resulted in a rapid increase in student numbers without a corresponding increase in the resources to teach them. The University of Wales, Aberystwyth, for example has more than doubled its student numbers since 1990, although exact comparisons cannot be made due to the far wider range of campus-based and non campus-based students which are now catered for.

## Background

The first attempts at establishing undergraduate LIS courses in the United Kingdom were in the mid 1960s during a period of rapid growth of higher education to take account of the needs of the expanding economy and the post-war baby boom. Several new universities were established and existing ones were expanded. There was also the introduction of an entirely new higher education sector known as polytechnics which were often created from the merger and/or expansion of a number of higher educational institutions in one area. These new, and often large teaching institutions were encouraged to develop vocational courses at the non-degree, undergraduate and postgraduate levels using more flexible and innovative teaching methods. In 1964 the UK government established the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) to validate and oversee the degree schemes in this new sector to ensure they maintained educational standards.

At the same time there was an expansion and change in the structure of professional education for librarians and information workers. Until then there had been the alternatives of a postgraduate diploma or masters' degree qualifications aimed primarily at entrants to the academic library sector or else practice-based professional qualifications courses leading to Associate membership of the Library Association for the remainder. These were frequently taught part-time or else through correspondence courses. In 1964 the Library Association, introduced a revised and expanded two-year full-time course for non-degree entrants, although some commentators would have preferred a move directly to graduate only entry to the profession. A number of new LIS departments were established, at this time, primarily to teach the two-year course, including one entirely new 'monotechnic' institution - the College of Librarianship Wales. This was established in Aberystwyth, a remote university town on the west Wales coast, and home of the National Library of Wales, and was intended to meet the particular educational needs of Welsh-speaking students. The new institution did not however only fulfil its original rather limited role for long. It soon grew to become the largest and most dynamic of the UK library schools of the time and sought to establish an international reputation.

The mid-1960s saw continuing debate in the UK library profession and among educators as to the wisdom and practicality of introducing an undergraduate degree course in 'librarianship'. The advantage of such a course would be that all students would receive some level of funding to cover the fees, and all but the most wealthy would also receive help with living

costs, whereas government funding at the postgraduate level was restricted to relatively small numbers of the most able students. On the other hand, some commentators questioned whether the subject constituted enough of an academic discipline to warrant a three-year first degree course. Some initial degree schemes were proposed to the new CNAA by library schools in the polytechnics but did not receive approval. Members of the Council were wary about establishing too many new disciplines within the polytechnic sector and preferred to wait to see if any schemes would be forthcoming from among the universities which had the power to validate their own degrees. Thus first 'general' degree scheme was eventually established by the new university of Strathclyde in Scotland in 1965. However, full academic respectability for the discipline could only come from an 'honours' scheme offered by one of the older established universities.

In 1966 discussions took place between the neighbouring institutions in Aberystwyth concerning ways of enhancing the academic content of the library education provided by CLW to warrant an 'honours' degree awarded by UCW. The most obvious way to do this was to create a Joint Honours scheme combining librarianship with a traditional academic discipline in the sciences, social sciences or humanities. This would provide sufficient academic rigour for a degree course and also give students a subject specialisation which they could apply to and enhance their library studies. Thus parts of the curriculum were deliberately designed to take this into account - such as the compilation of a detailed subject bibliography in their academic subject. However, due to a combination of bureaucratic conservatism and academic snobbery, none of the existing university faculties was willing to oversee the new joint honours scheme and award its degrees. Thus a new joint Board of Library Studies was established to oversee the degree which offered the unique nomenclature of B.Lib.

It was this scheme that began in 1967 and remained largely unchanged in structure until the early 1990s, and became the means of entry to the profession for students without a first degree. The Aberystwyth scheme was quickly followed by a variety of other degree schemes offered by other library schools attached to universities and polytechnics, but most avoided the 'joint honours' structure and no others offered the same degree nomenclature.

By the mid 1970s first degree courses in had largely replaced the earlier professional qualifications administered by the Library Association, which eventually phased out its role as an examining body and chose rather to exercise its role in determining professional

education in terms of the validation of courses. The majority of new entrants to the profession continued to join at the postgraduate level however, and most educators saw this as the preferred route into the profession. Yet from the point of view of the student the advantages of guaranteed funding, together with the government's declared aim of expanding undergraduate education have meant that such courses have been perceived as an area for growth.

## **The Joint Honours Programme 1967-1990**

Under the UWA degree scheme, Librarianship could be combined with a wide range of subjects including law, education, foreign languages, economics, geography and the sciences. However the majority of students tended to combine it with the more traditional humanities degrees, such as English, or history. As such it was undoubtedly a success, and attracted an intake of between fifty and seventy highly qualified students each year for the first two decades of its operation. Yet there were a number of inherent problems with the scheme, which became more apparent towards the end of the 1980s, when numbers applying to the course began to decline significantly at the expense of degree schemes in information and library studies elsewhere or else to other subjects. Some of these were due to the inflexibility of the traditional UK university three term teaching pattern, which have only begun to be addressed by the introduction of modularisation in the 1990s and will only be solved by the adoption of full semesterisation. However, other more pressing problems related to the structure of the degree and the unequal relationship between the institutions concerned (student numbers of the CLW were approximately 10% of those at UCW).

The most important structural problem arose from the high entry qualifications required for the course - higher than any other UK library school - which were determined by the second 'academic' subject in the degree programme. As a result many good quality, experienced and committed students were refused places because they had insufficiently high qualifications in a second subject, whereas other students with little knowledge of, or commitment, to a career in information work took them as a 'back door' means of entry to a single honours degree scheme in a popular subject such as English or Law. The typical student was therefore young, academically bright, predominantly female, and middle class. Whereas the admissions tutors were aware of a substantial untapped market of more mature and experienced students, including those wishing to change careers, but without the required 'A' level grades.

Another problem came from a steady loss of students from the course at the end of their first year of studies to single honours programmes elsewhere in the University. University of Wales regulations provide all students with the opportunity to change courses at this time so long as they were sufficiently well qualified to meet the requirements of the new department. However there was no compensating opportunity for students of other disciplines to move onto information and library studies programme. It was clear to the academic staff of the College of Librarianship that some of their most gifted and successful students were being deliberately targeted by their partners to persuade them to switch to single honours at the end of the first year and that the course was perceived by other departments as a useful means of 'trying out' some students, to see whether they would make the grade, rather than offering them the commitment of a single honours place. This was particularly apparent in those academic subjects which were most heavily over-subscribed.

A final problem which became apparent at the end of the 1980s and has continued since has been the steady decline in the numbers of 'traditional' eighteen or nineteen year old students from middle-class backgrounds who are entering the course. This has been due to the growth of other newer, and ostensibly more attractive courses within the Universities Central Admissions Service (UCAS) 'Mass Communication and documentation' classification - such as communications studies, media studies (theatre, film and television studies) and journalism. Over the last few years the pool of young students applying to universities from school to follow this subject has shrunk to about 170 for the whole of the UK, of which Aberystwyth has succeeded in recruiting between 20% and 25%. The growth in recruitment to LIS courses has come rather from more mature students with a far more varied range of backgrounds.

## **The Merger and beyond**

The merger between UCW and CLW in August 1989 created a new Department of Information and Library Studies within a new Faculty of Information Studies. Faculty status was offered to subject departments which administered their own degree nomenclatures (Education, Law and Information Studies), but this was a mixed blessing, and to some degree hindered the introduction of new and degree schemes across faculty boundaries. It was subsequently removed by a restructuring of the University in 1993, when all Departments were incorporated within three faculties. Information and Library Studies became part of an enlarged Faculty of

Economics and Social Sciences, but was also able to operate joint degree schemes within the Faculties of Arts and Sciences.

The merger was largely the result of external factors, notably the relatively high cost of operating a monotechnic institution for students of one discipline in such close proximity to a larger degree awarding institution. This was becoming increasingly apparent with the rapidly growing use of information technology applications within the courses during the 1980s and the consequent need to access academic networks. However the merger also presented both parties with opportunities to revise and restructure their courses. Full integration within the university gave the new department more control over its offerings and the ability to attract new students from outside, and also from other disciplines, on to its courses. It also provided UCW with a significant increase in the number of postgraduate students, as the postgraduate level education continued to represent the bulk of the new department's teaching.

The first priority upon merger was to reverse the steady decline in recruitment to its undergraduate programme. This was achieved in part by relatively minor alterations to the packaging and marketing of the scheme by transferring it from the P100 'library studies' classification used by UCAS to P200 'information studies', and also the abolition of the B.Lib nomenclature in favour of B.A., or B.Sc. These reflected gradual changes to the content of the degree scheme that had taken place over the previous decade and indeed to pattern and emphasis of professional education generally. After the merger it was also possible for students of other subjects to switch onto the information and library studies scheme at the end of the first year of their studies rather than merely to leave. Furthermore the introduction of a university modularisation programme, enabled many students from other disciplines, and with no intention of pursuing a career in the field, to select individual modules from the information and library studies schemes, notably in areas such as management, marketing and information retrieval. All of these changes have helped to slow down the decline in the joint honours programme, but not to reverse it or even stabilise the numbers.

A much more fundamental far-reaching change was the introduction of an entirely new undergraduate single honours course in information and library studies which is taught in parallel with the joint honours course, but which involves a larger number of ILS modules and also assessed periods of fieldwork as an integral part of the course. The great advantage of this course was that the department was entirely responsible for recruitment and so it could be offered to more mature students, and those with experience of library work, but without

the relatively high academic qualifications that would be required to pursue a more academic subject. These students have tended to be hardworking, committed and more willing to build upon, and contribute from, their own work experience than their younger, and often better qualified counterparts. Thus the single honours scheme gradually became the more successful of the two full-time schemes and has done much to sustain the numbers of full-time undergraduate students within the department. Yet in the difficult times experienced in UK university education during the 1990s merely to remain in a steady-state would not have been acceptable and would have resulted in reduced funding. All departments have been required to meet targets for the expansion of student numbers, which has proved difficult to achieve among the traditional markets targets for the course.

Other developments aimed at increasing undergraduate student numbers have been less successful. The department has introduced an entirely new information science degree scheme, taught in conjunction with the departments of computer science and mathematics, and also an 'information management, accounting and finance, degree. Whilst both of these were successful academically in equipping their students for the job market, they have failed to attract enough recruits to remain viable. The reason for this lack of interest in these courses may have been due to a lack of understanding of the nature and role of information science and information management, among potential undergraduates. There is a tendency for the younger applicants to university to think only in terms of those subjects which they have studied at school, or else those areas of work which they come into contact during their daily lives. Thus there appears to be a difficult marketing job to convince both potential students and their advisors of the role and nature of subjects such as information management and information science, which is not the case at the postgraduate level. The Department is therefore currently examining other ways in which it can cover the areas of information science and information management more effectively and flexibly, notably through the creation of a common core with the information and library studies degrees, providing a variety of different pathways and leading to different qualifications reflecting the content of the studies.

The two other main pedagogical issues facing the designers of the undergraduate course are the same as those for any course in this field; the rapidly changing role of information technology, which now pervades all aspects of the course, and the increased discrepancy in the level of computer skills and knowledge between different students. The difficulties of



dealing with such an vast and volatile issue such as the impact of the Internet, over a three-year period, in a course containing twenty-four independent modules, in a logical and progressive way, without significant duplication represents a major pedagogical challenge. Likewise coping with the minority of students who have no background in computing, and possibly have never touched a keyboard before, in the same classes as those with competencies in using a wide range of basic computer applications and experience of searching a large number of information sources represents a challenge.

## **Distance Learning Courses**

If UWA had continued to offer its undergraduate degrees in information and library studies only in the traditional full-time teaching mode, this article would have told a story of gradual decline, slowed, but not reversed by the various initiatives described above. However the one major development that has resulted in a large and continuing increase in student numbers has been to offer the single honours degree through a Distance Learning mode.

The College of Librarianship Wales became first the UK library school to offer a degree by distance learning, when in November 1985, it accepted fifteen students on to a three-year course leading to a Master's degree in the management of library and information services. The course was intended to equip qualified and experienced staff with the necessary skills to fill management posts. It was open to graduate librarians, those with postgraduate qualifications, and the holders of non-graduate professional qualifications with substantial work experience, but was never intended as a means of entry into the profession ([Edwards, Roberts & Tunley, 1990](#)). The success of the course resulted in the development of alternative second-year modules in Young People's Librarianship and Collection Management and also in the introduction of an entirely new Msc course in Health Information Management. Yet most enquiries received were for a distance learning course which did not merely offer those with existing LIS qualifications the opportunity of enhancing them but rather one which provided an entry into the profession.

Part-time correspondence courses in librarianship existed for several decades in the UK and survived until the end of the 1970s, but had fallen into disfavour. They were often limited in scope and lead to what was usually regarded as a second-class qualification. Yet throughout the 1980s there was a continual demand from both employers and potential students for a degree course delivered in this mode, that would enable those already working in the field to

progress to more responsible posts. This also matched government policy which wished to expand degree level education, but without incurring the enormous costs of new full-time courses. In 1992 UWA secured funding, under the Universities Funding Council Flexible Learning Initiative programme, and also from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales to introduce a first degree in information and library studies by distance learning, incorporating a number of open learning features such as the freedom from tightly defined time limits or a prescribed order for completion of modules.

The new course was designed for mature students without any specified entry qualification, but who could demonstrate some recent educational achievement and had experience working within a library or information environment. This 'prior experiential learning' gains students exemption from the Part 1 of their degree course (equivalent to their first year studies). They are however are required to complete two introductory modules which develop their skills in Information Technology and Human Communication skills. These are taught primarily at an intensive introductory study school, immediately before the students commence working on their own.

The bulk of the course delivery for this degree is through printed materials, together with photocopied readings - along the lines of Open University modules, but audio, video and computerised learning materials are also be used as well as annual attendance at three five-day study schools. Access to a reasonably sophisticated microcomputer, together with a basic integrated applications package such as Microsoft *Works*, either at home or at work, is also a pre-requisite to acceptance on the course.

Without any formal publicity, the University of Wales, the Department began to receive a stream of enquiries and then applications, from potential candidates, throughout Great Britain, and occasionally on the Continent, many of whom had been waiting for years for such an educational opportunity. Typical candidates are individuals with several years of experience in information work, but unable to progress to more responsible posts. The majority of students accepted so far hold the academic qualifications necessary to attend a full-time university course as a mature student, but are unable to do so. Indeed many had only discovered their chosen career path after they had married, had children, and acquired the usual financial commitments which tend to prevent adults from giving up their jobs and going to college. Typical candidates are in their late thirties, although the ages range between mid-twenties and mid-fifties. They are predominantly female, married and with a family.

The demand from good-quality candidates was so great that the initial plans for an intake of about fifteen students each year were enlarged to allow for two intakes per year, each of about thirty students. From the initial intake in December 1993 the course has been consistently oversubscribed, with many suitably qualified candidates having to wait for places on later intakes. Additional 'third' intakes are planned for the summer of 1997 and 1998, to help clear some of the backlog of students wanting to join the course, but it is envisaged that the steady state recruitment will remain at two intakes per year each of which will be in the region of thirty students. The first students to complete the course are likely to graduate in the summer of 1997. Others from the initial intakes may take up to two more years to complete their degrees. The distance learning teaching mode has been so successful that the department is currently drawing up proposals for offering its 'first qualification' diploma/masters courses in this way.

The design of the new degree scheme, and the production of the teaching materials has put an enormous strain on the academic staff of the department. Indeed, at one time some of the first student intake were completing the modules faster than the academic staff could provide new ones. Likewise the volume of additional marking and detailed supervision and feedback required by students working remotely from the department have also provided challenges for the teachers. Similarly the recruitment and administration of such a large student body, and the organisation of two study schools in vacation time (each of which now includes more than 120 students) have created logistical problems for a newly established Open Learning Unit. Yet on the evidence of the first seven intakes, the degree scheme has been a great success, and has encouraged other university departments to introduce courses delivered in this mode. The overall performance of the distance learning undergraduate students is equally as good as those on the full-time courses, and in some cases has been better. In general they tend to be better motivated, more mature, and with a wide range of relevant practical experience. To date there has been a low drop-out rate, and these have primarily resulted in personal or financial difficulties rather than dissatisfaction with the course or the inability to keep pace. Some students have already secured promotion to more responsible posts on the basis of their studies, prior to graduating. The standard of written work has also been good, with isolation from other students, and an occasional lack of self-confidence as the most common stumbling blocks. These are currently being investigated through the use of an experimental computer conferencing system administered by the Open Learning Unit, which may well become an integral part of the course when a higher proportion of those studying have access to e-mail.

The main difficulties in delivering the distance learning undergraduate course, other than the volume of work generated, relate to the provision of facilities and materials. Many of the distance learning students have a lower general level of computer competency than their full-time equivalents, although once again there will be considerable discrepancies displayed within any group. Also many of the computer semi-literate will have useful experience as users of library housekeeping systems, and an understanding of their strengths and weakness. Some of these matters can be addressed in intensive study school practical sessions, although this is not the ideal way of trying to teach computer applications. There are followed up by practical exercises set at home, but sometimes a simple misunderstanding, which could be addressed and clarified in a matter of seconds in a class room, could prevent a computer application from working properly, and therefore frustrate an understanding of the overall processes involved. In order to get over this, the Open Learning Unit run a telephone 'hot-line' to talk students through such practical assignments. A third way in which information technology is addressed on the course is in the design of assignments which encourage to look critically at the way in which IT is used in their own workplaces, and also at its potential applications.

Access to a sufficient range of up to date readings also presents many distance learning students with difficulties, particularly those working in the public and special libraries sectors. All students embarking on the course are warned of the likely expense of book purchase and in some instances employers have helped. The university library seeks to assist by providing special 'distance learning' postal loan copies of all the core text books, which are only available for reference use by full-time students. Because this second category of students are working in a more flexible manner, the library does not get the same peaks in demand for a particular title to provide material for an essay on a due date, which has been the experience with other students. However it is in the area of periodical literature that most problems are encountered. The University has sought to produce special packs of photocopied readings, where copyright clearance has been granted by the publishers. The readings are however deliberately kept separate from the course materials, in case the latter should ever be sold or licensed to other academic institutions. The difficulties of negotiating fees and clearing copyrights, represents a significant task, largely because of the different practices used by publishers.

## Conclusion

In spite of the decline in the full-time undergraduate numbers on LIS courses at Aberystwyth over the last fifteen years, the programme is nevertheless flourishing as a result of the new distance learning mode of delivery. There have been many more fundamental changes to the courses over the last decade than throughout the first two decades of their existence, and no doubt the rate of change will continue to increase. If present trends were to continue, the University might decide that the full-time undergraduate programme ceased to be economically viable and should be discontinued in favour of a corresponding expansion of distance learning numbers. However most teachers would see that as a retrograde step. The presence of a lively and articulate undergraduate student body on campus presents a useful challenge and testing ground in the design of effective LISD courses.

David Stoker

[R.J. Edwards, D. Hywel Roberts & M.F. Tunley, 'Aberystwyth - at a distance', \*Education for Information\*, \(1990\), 341-348.](#)